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Teaching Qualitative Research in the Business School

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Introduction

Anecdotally at least, we get the impression that being asked to teach qualitative research methods is something of a poisoned chalice for many academics in business schools. The subject is generally perceived as dry and boring, perhaps because it appears to be content-free, mechanical and rather abstract. Indeed we both got 'landed' with teaching qualitative methods as our first teaching responsibilities when we first became lecturers ourselves – perhaps because it was difficult to say no! Although there is a wealth of textbooks on qualitative research – both the conceptual ideas underpinning it as well as 'how to do it' in terms of methodologies (e.g. Bryman and Bell, 2007; Seale et al., 2007; Hammersley, 2008; Saunders et al., 2009; Silverman, 2010) – there seems to be very little guidance on 'how to teach it'. In our experience, although textbooks are useful, most of us actually learn the skills of qualitative research by doing it (and making mistakes on the way!) Similarly, we learned (and continue to learn) how to teach qualitative research by actually teaching it – and by making mistakes in the classroom.

What we seek to do in this chapter, therefore, is to reflect upon our experiences of teaching qualitative research methods in the context of

our own business school. Every year, since 2004, we have taught large classes of Masters students (up to 300) in standard lecture theatres – doing so (out of choice) as a double-act. Though not without its problems and frustrations, as the years went by we have gradually improved our teaching evaluation scores and have increasingly come to enjoy teaching these classes.¹

The chapter proceeds as follows. First we set out some ideas about teaching and learning, focusing on teaching as improvisation and some analogies between teaching and musical performance – analogies we ourselves have found helpful in guiding and developing our practice. We then present specific examples of how we operate – i.e. some of the things we *do* in our classes. These are examples of activities that not only have worked well for us in the classroom; but more importantly, student feedback suggests that our approach has proved valuable in developing their dissertations and other research projects. It is important to stress that we are not being prescriptive – we are describing what works for us. The point is to find ways of playing to your own strengths and interests. You may not play a musical instrument – but what we are suggesting is that you bring some aspect of your ‘self’ and your personal enthusiasms to the classroom. We find it remarkable that when, from time to time at least, we remove the mask of teacher/expert, how enthusiastic the students’ response can be.

Teaching as an Improvisational Art

While pedagogical expertise and technical knowledge are essential to it, ultimately teaching is a creative act; it makes something fresh from existing knowledge in spontaneous, improvised efforts of mind and spirit, disciplined by education and experience. (Banner and Cannon, 1997: 3)

Drawing on the work of Jamous and Peloille (1970), Delamont (1995: 7) examines teaching in terms of its ‘location in a two-dimensional space of indeterminacy and technicality’. For Delamont, technical skills and

¹Indeed, we recently won a ‘Lord Dearing Award’ (the University of Nottingham’s recognition of teaching excellence) for teaching these classes.

knowledge are the explicit, rule governed, codified part of any job or occupation, whereas on the other hand 'indeterminacy is the hidden curriculum of the job performance: all the tacit, implicit, unexamined facets of any job' (Delamont, 1995: 7). We argue that it is important to insist – however much tension exists between technicality and indeterminacy in occupational performance – that *both* should be included in all teaching practice. Gage (1978: 15) – in the aptly titled book *The Scientific Basis of the Art of Teaching* – recommends that:

As a practical art, teaching must be recognised as a process that calls for intuition, creativity, improvisation, and expressiveness – a process that leaves room for departures from what is implied by rules, formulas and algorithms.

For us in this chapter, it is the intuitive and improvisatory elements of teaching that are the main focus of attention. This is not to deny, however, that the technical elements are unimportant; it is more the case that the scientific models that stress these elements have had more than their fair share of attention. In redressing the balance, however, we would agree with Delamont's point that the 'invocation of teaching as artistry is a vague one' and that:

those who use the metaphor rarely specify what kind of performer or creator they have in mind. Is the teacher an actor, a painter, a sculptor, a poet, a ballet dancer, a musician, a composer, a chef, a playwright, a novelist, a choreographer, a quiltmaker, a fashion designer, or a singer? (Delamont, 1995: 7)

Teachers in general, conceivably, could be all or any of these but what about those who teach qualitative research methods? As we said earlier, many might assume it must be taught mechanically and scientifically. However, the approach we use and wish to recommend is one where teachers in performance might be more like jazz musicians or improvisational actors. For us, it is improvisation that is the key concept.

Hatch (1999: 78), in her paper on the value of the jazz metaphor in the study of organizations, argues that improvisation 'constitutes the distinguishing feature of Jazz'. She goes on to describe a typical performance as:

structured around the playing of tunes which themselves are loosely structured via partial musical arrangements called heads. The head of a tune defines, at a minimum, a chord sequence, a basic melodic idea, and usually an approximate tempo ... Improvisation centres around the head, which is usually played through 'straight' (without much improvisational embellishment) at the beginning of the tune, then improvised upon, and finally returned to and played again as the ending. The head gets a tune started by suggesting a particular rhythm, harmony and melody. The tune is then built from this starting point via improvisation within which different interpretations of the initial idea are offered and new ideas and further interpretations can be explored.

We believe that there is much of value to be learned from working creatively as a teacher who improvises within a rule-bound framework. To say that teaching involves improvised performances is to suggest that it involves skills such as flexibility, intuition, spontaneity and creativity (Miner et al., 1996; Weick, 1998). Just as improvisation in jazz requires familiarity with certain social norms and musical customs (Berliner, 1994), effective teaching needs the prior absorption of considerable knowledge, skills and conventions. As Crossan and Sorrenti (1997: 165) make clear, 'good improvisation relies on the traditional technical skills gained through practice'. The point here is that teachers, like jazz musicians, react to circumstances on the spur of the moment: 'When I start off, I don't know what the punch line is going to be' (Buster Williams cited in Berliner, 1994: 218).

In other words, we argue that good teachers must be willing, creatively and imaginatively, to improvise – not only on subject matter – but also in the face of unexpected events: late students, awkward questions, strange answers and different levels of understanding within one session. Such effective improvisation is crucially dependent, therefore, on intuition; a quality that has been defined as 'an unconscious process based on distilled experience' (Crossan and Sorrenti, 1997: 57), or an 'analysis frozen into habit and into the capacity for rapid response through recognition' (Simon, 1989; see also Agor, 1986; Atkinson and Claxton, 2000).

The development of intuitive improvisational skills may be a gradual one, arising from the

experiences of the teacher. Effective teaching, just like a successful jazz session, arises from an intuitive, improvisational, dynamic

performance within a planned and mutually understood framework. We think that the best teachers are not only well prepared but also practised and skilful improvisers. The art of teaching, just like the art of jazz, is revealed only in 'live' performance and involves the creativity of spontaneous, intuitive improvisation in the lecture theatre. Thus, our depiction of the teacher as an improvisational performer is an attempt to grasp some of the subtleties and complexities in our working lives as academics. Teachers, just like creative artists, should seek to create 'a richness, immediacy and a graphic quality which engages the mind and imagination'. (Hartley, 1994: 210)

Thus, there is an intangible quality to good teaching. This quality arises from the synergistic combination of planning and improvisational performance involving subject matter, student–teacher dialogue, practical work and demonstration. In Berliner's (1994: 243–244) account of the learning processes of jazz musicians, he notes that:

By observing critical discussions and participating in them, learners become sensitive to wide-ranging criteria appropriate for the evaluation ... and they gain a deep respect for the refined listening abilities that attune seasoned artists to every nuance and detail of improvised performance.

In our teaching of qualitative research, we attempt to create such a critical dialogue between lecturers and students in an environment that includes ideas such as demonstration, rehearsal and practice. In other words, we are arguing for teaching research methods via the performance and improvisatory aspects of the art of teaching.

All the above points are particularly pertinent for us – in a sense our teaching double-act is like being in a small jazz band – we have to react and respond to the other's improvisations in real time. This is not something one can rehearse,² though we do feel we have improved over the last six years of teaching together. We can prepare, to a certain extent, by planning the framework and broad activities ('the head' in jazz terms); but we also need to be able to 'jam' (i.e. respond to each other's improvisations on the theme). Good improvisation, after all, involves trying hard

²Miles Davis, the jazz trumpeter and band leader, was notorious for telling his musicians not to practise and not to rehearse, but to save all their ideas for live performance in his band.

not to try too hard – which is to say that it calls for us to be both active and passive. Preparedness is absolutely necessary, yet it is also the case that, for it to be successful, improvisation is a collective activity which requires that the performers are (at least sometimes) surprised by what emerges. Good improvisation has two paradoxically necessary conditions – it can occur only if we have prepared for it and yet it will work only if the event of the improvisation exceeds our preparations and takes us unawares. As the jazz musician Ornette Coleman told Jacques Derrida:

What's really shocking in improvised music is that despite its name, most musicians use a 'framework' ... as a basis for improvising. I've just recorded a CD with a European musician, Joachim Kühn, and the music I wrote to play with him, that we recorded in August 1996, has two characteristics: it's totally improvised, but at the same time it follows the laws and rules of European structure. And yet, when you hear it, it has a completely improvised feel. (Coleman and Derrida, 2004: 321)

This means, of course that there is always a risk of failure – what Hatch (1999: 83) calls a 'trainwreck': 'where the musicians so interfere with one another that they cannot go on playing the tune'. Furthermore, it is not just the performers who are important to whether an improvisation works – the 'audience' are also crucial. Indeed, in our teaching experience, there have been times when things that worked one year fall flat the next. But we think it is these kinds of risks that give an exciting edge to both jazz and this kind of teaching. The risks of improvisation and collaboration are vividly evoked by Mengelberg (1995):

Part of improvisation, of the act of improvising, playing with other people, has very much to do with survival strategy. You have, of course, all your expectations and plans destroyed the moment you play with other people. They all have their own ideas of how the musical world at that moment should be. So there are two, three, five, six composers there at the same time destroying each other's ideas, pieces. (Misha Mengelberg in Corbett, 1995: 236)

Having extolled the value of improvisation in teaching, we should acknowledge that it is a scary thing to do – it is after all inherently risky. So, to return to a musical analogy, musical beginners usually need to bring along a score and can only play the written notes. However, as confidence and experience

increases, improvisation is something that starts to become possible – you can move away from the written notes – at least from time to time. We certainly did not try improvisation during our first lectures in 2004 – but it was an ideal we aimed for. Even today, we still use a written ‘score’ – i.e. a teaching plan and a set of notes that we regularly defer to. So, if you’re new to teaching qualitative research, we’d suggest that you start with a solid teaching plan and slowly introduce elements of improvisation in response to students’ questions and your own interests. After all, as we emphasized above, it is only possible to improvise when you are thoroughly prepared.

So, now we turn to what these sorts of ideas can mean in practice for us.

A Musical Brief Encounter with Qualitative Research Methods

Our aim as a teaching duo is to generate and nurture enthusiasm among our students for qualitative research methods. Ours is a module that many Masters students in business think will probably be uninteresting and irrelevant to their future managerial practice – though it is compulsory. Our overall approach, therefore, is one founded upon interaction, participation and improvisation. In the end, we are trying to get students involved with research at a deeper level than is required merely to pass the module. Although we aim to help all students, in particular with their dissertation, we hope that some, at least, will be inspired to move on to further study, and as we also teach qualitative research on the PhD programme, we know that this happens.

We typically have three separate weekly two-hour classes of Masters students in groups of up to 300. Many have not studied in the UK before (they come from almost 50 different countries); they’re usually unfamiliar with qualitative research and often arrive sceptical of its value to their future careers in corporate and financial management. These are not easy groups to teach, particularly in formal lecture theatres. But we have worked together since 2004/2005 and have continuously reflected on what has worked well and less well (indeed, some of these specific experiences and ideas have been published, e.g. Humphreys, 2006). So the teaching approach set out below has evolved – an approach that has also been enriched by a developing mutual trust that enables us to take risks

and to experiment with different content and styles of delivery. And although we have the option of sharing out the load between us and halving our student contact time, we have chosen to teach all sessions as a team because of the synergy we get from working together.

A typical session

Mini-lecture

Before the module starts, every student receives a pack containing the module outline, copies of a research paper for each session (which we ask them to read prior to the class), along with three questions linked to the academic paper, for discussion in groups. We start each session with a 30-minute lecture on a foundational aspect of qualitative methods that is closely related to the pre-reading (for example, research interviews, ethnographic approaches, participant observation, grounded theory, coding and other methods of data collection or analysis). Although we take it in turns to deliver the lectures, we also interject or interrupt one another, improvising to present alternative views, clarify arguments, emphasize particularly important points, and so on. In other words, we operate self-consciously as a double-act – students have likened us to figures such as Laurel and Hardy, good cop/bad cop and even Jekyll and Hyde. This way, students are exposed to our different personalities, experiences and styles of research practice. We also seek deliberately to reflect something of the nature of academic debate (at conferences and seminars) and we encourage student participation throughout the session. In other words, we try to communicate our own enthusiasm for, and enjoyment of, our work as academics. The aim is to inspire students to think creatively about research, and to demonstrate what it can do for their current studies and future working lives.

Group discussions

The next phase is a 30-minute group discussion, which focuses on the three set questions about the pre-reading. In this part of the session we start by giving supplementary guidance about the kind of issues the students could consider in their groups. (The groups, of around eight students, are pre-arranged to be representative of different nationalities and main degree subject.) During the group work, we circulate and join in with the students' debates to give them guidance, stimulate ideas and challenge

them to think through issues in greater depth. In this way, we get the chance to learn at least some of the students' names and they can also get to know us on a less intimidating level. Towards the end of this part of the session, we tell three groups that they need to prepare a short presentation on one of the questions in plenary, in order to initiate a whole-class discussion. Although in early weeks we find that some students have not read the set article, the group work and the possibility of having to present seems to exert enough peer pressure to encourage the majority to get into the habit of doing the necessary reading. Indeed, one of our aims is to push students into reading scholarly articles that they might find challenging – and to see such reading as an integral part of their whole degree.

Plenary

We then convene 30 minutes of plenary discussion in which we encourage as many students as possible to make a contribution to answering the set questions and to raising wider issues about research processes. The aim is to encourage interaction between student/student and student/lecturers, creating an atmosphere of constructive, critical debate about scholarly endeavour. This is hard work, especially at the beginning of the module, but we find that having two lecturers running and taking part in the debate makes it easier to stimulate student participation. In the inevitable silences, our team approach to teaching allows us to continue the debate and try to rouse students with self-consciously provocative and controversial statements. Over the weeks, many students become comfortable with this way of working and therefore more willing to contribute. We also try very hard to use as many of their names as possible in inviting particular students to respond to specific questions so that they feel their contribution is noticed and valued.

Summary phase

Finally, there is 20 minutes of summary and suggestions about how *we* might have answered the questions. This is a semi-formal lecture, but again, we improvise in our presentation, incorporating the themes and ideas that the students have brought to the discussions. Often, we genuinely learn from students' comments in the plenary, and so this part

of the session ends up as a three-way conversation – between us as the two lecturers and many of the students.

Overall, then, working together as a team in running a session in this way, especially given the large numbers, means that interaction and group learning is much more achievable. Not only that, it's more fun for the students (and for us) and makes the challenging content more accessible.

The First and Last Sessions

To illustrate what happens in class more specifically, we now describe the approaches we take in the first and last sessions of the module.

In the first session we aim to introduce our subject in ways that grab students' attention and make them think that there might be some value in attending further lectures (remember, many students turn up thinking it's going to be dull and irrelevant). A particular problem is that some have not read any of the module materials (though they have been asked to do so) and are still in the throes of culture shock, arriving at a new university (not to mention a new country). And, by an accident of timetabling, ours is usually the first lecture that the students attend.

However, we don't want to dumb-down the contents to give the impression that qualitative research is a soft option simply to make it more palatable. So, after necessary preliminaries about the structure and content of the module, followed by an introductory lecture on the nature of qualitative research in organizations, we show a short clip from the 1946 British film *Brief Encounter*. In introducing the clip we suggest that watching it represents an opportunity to do a simplified version of cultural anthropology – i.e. observing a strange culture that no one in the lecture theatre has been part of. A key point during our introductory lecture is the importance of *inference* in the practice of qualitative research. In order to guide their 'observations' as they watch the clip, therefore, we suggest sociological issues that might be inferred from it – such as the nature of the British class system, gender roles and attitudes of the British at that time to other nations.

The rest of the session is a plenary discussion in which we encourage students to share their views and ideas about the clip. The intent here is to give students an accessible way to see that qualitative research can be complex, nuanced and interesting – and so, worthy of further study. Not

only do the students seem to enjoy the film clip (they laugh at the jokes and some of them tell us that they subsequently buy the DVD) many are able to provide interesting and perceptive responses to our questions. If the interactions in this first session go well (and they always have so far) it encourages both us and the students to look forward to the next classes.

In the module's final session, most students are, by now, accustomed to our participative and interactive ways of working so we feel able to use potentially riskier approaches. This final session needs to bring together themes from previous classes concerned with analysing and interpreting qualitative material. Earlier, we dealt with some of the more routine aspects of analysis, so the final session emphasizes the creative and imaginative approaches to interpretation.

One of us has written a paper called 'Is ethnography jazz?' (Humphreys et al., 2003), which is the set paper for the session, and the opening 30-minute lecture is about how an analogy with jazz can help to make sense of qualitative material. In order to give these ideas more impact, before the group discussion we illustrate our point through some actual jazz. Each student is supplied with a single sheet of music ('Cantaloupe Island' by Herbie Hancock) and we tell them that this music could be thought of as similar to some qualitative material needing interpretation. We are both amateur musicians (Mike, saxophone, Mark, flute) and, together with student-musician volunteers, we play the basic melody, each improvising on the theme in a rudimentary manner.

We then contrast *our* novice attempts to play jazz with a film clip of Herbie Hancock's quintet playing the same tune, but with (let us say) rather more sophistication and complexity in their improvised interpretation. The aim here is to illustrate the creativity demanded by good qualitative research. The approach also functions to reassure students that, as novice researchers, they should not expect to be able to do sophisticated analysis from day one, but with practice and application they can improve, produce work good enough for a dissertation and, should they wish to do so, progress further still. The group and plenary discussions are enhanced by both the fun of our faltering attempts and the contrast with impressive jazz musicianship. We understand that many students find this session particularly memorable and we hope that this helps to fix the whole module in their minds. As one student put it in feedback on the module: 'the jazz concert in the last lecture was brilliant and helpful to approach the subject in a different way'.

Coda

We acknowledge that our approach doesn't work for everyone – some students would clearly prefer merely to be given 'the answers'. Our view is that to accede to such demands would contradict the ethos of qualitative research – we can hardly claim that our subject is complex and nuanced, and then provide ostensibly simple recipes and prescriptions. We agree with Rebecca Attwood (2009: 35) who recently commented: some 'students who just want to be told what they need to know to pass exams give good teachers low ratings ... but other students love it because their other classes aren't challenging enough'. We work on the premise that Masters students should welcome a challenge and reactions from students suggest that many do indeed 'love it'. In summary then, we are 'not recommending that all teachers take up the saxophone' (Humphreys, 2006: 184); but we are commending the ideas surrounding improvisation as an approach to teaching. After all, in the immortal words of Duke Ellington:

It don't mean a thing (if it ain't got that swing)!

Further Reading

More detail regarding improvisation can be found in Nachmanovitch (1990). See also, Cantaloupe Island – (Hubbard, Henderson, Hancock, Carter, Williams)–NYC1985: www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5GEZD4GMOs.

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